

PRESS RELEASE

House Armed Services Committee Bob Stump, Chairman

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CHAIRMAN BOB STUMP HEARING ON VIEQUES

Today the committee meets to discuss the administration's plans for the Navy's training facility in Vieques, Puerto Rico.

Over the last two years, the issue of live fire training on the range at Vieques, Puerto Rico has been of great concern to the people of Vieques, the Department of the Navy, the Department of Defense and Congress. Throughout this period, the position of the uniformed leadership of both the Navy and the Marine Corps has been clear - the range at Vieques is critical to the training of our sailors and Marines.

Former Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Jay Johnson said it best when he stated that, "Vieques is an irreplaceable asset...it's the crown jewel of combined arms, live-fire training. It's the world standard."

I agree with this assessment and believe that the Vieques training range is an irreplaceable asset, the closure of which would significantly damage the readiness of U.S. military forces.

Last year, Congress enacted legislation that provided the people of Vieques the opportunity to decide whether the Navy should be allowed to continue to train on the island. However, I believe that allowing residents of the island to decide on the future of military training sets a bad precedent that would place at risk future access to military training ranges both in the United States and abroad.

That said, I also believe that the Administration's recent decision to preempt the referendum and to leave Vieques by May 2003 also places at risk our ability to properly train our naval forces.

Therefore, if the Department of Defense wants the committee's support in canceling the referendum and leaving the island, then it must first prove that the closure of Vieques will not damage military readiness and that a viable alternative is in fact available. It must also convince us that this decision will not result in other nations and communities seeking to force the U.S. military to withdraw from other critical training facilities around the world.

I look forward to hearing the testimony of our witnesses this morning on these points. Until these questions are answered in a convincing manner, I will remain convinced that the Administration's decision is a step in the wrong direction.

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